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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the State of New Jersey Board of Education's evaluation of the Operation School Renewal (OSR) Program, a multi-year assistance program involving the urban school districts of Trenton, East Orange, and Neptune Township (New Jersey). Goals included the following: (1) attendance improvement; (2) reduction of disruptive pupil behavior; (3) improvement in pupils' basic skills proficiencies; (4) increasing youth employment through vocational education; and (5) strengthening principals' effectiveness. Part I: New Jersey's Plan discusses the OSR's background, and outlines and describes the general plan, including the following: (1) planning assumptions/expectations; (2) selection process/criteria; (3) organizational features; (4) planning/implementation; (5) evaluation; and (6) funding. Part II: Implementing Operation School Renewal discusses the planning process, and the following key components of state assistance to the Trenton district: were the following: (1) the School Renewal Team; (2) special external assistance; (3) Principals' Training Institutes; and (4) an electronic monthly reporting system. Part III: What We See discusses the State Board of Education's evaluation of OSR in Trenton (New Jersey) in the following areas: (1) assumptions and expectations; (2) goal-based action planning; (3) organization and support structure; (4) financial assistance; and (5) interim results. Part IV: The Future, discusses plans for urban school improvement incorporating the best features of OSR and other pilot projects. (FMW)

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WHY CAN'T THEY SEE WHAT WE SEE? THREE VIEWS OF A STATE SPONSORED URBAN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVE

"WHAT WE SEE: A DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION'S VIEW OF A STATE-SPONSORED URBAN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVE"

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"WHAT WE SEE: A DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION'S VIEW OF A STATE-SPONSORED URBAN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVE"

PART I: NEW JERSEY'S PLAN

BACKGROUND

In March 1984, New Jersey Governor Thomas H. Kean, Commissioner of Education Saul Cooperman and the State Board of Education announced "An Urban Initiative." Through this program, the State of New Jersey proposed to join with urban educators in launching a campaign to improve inner city schools. Originally, the Urban Initiative consisted of two major parts: a Broad Based Component (BBC) designed to provide 56 designated urban districts with assistance in one or more of nine program areas; and Operation School Renewal (OSR) designed to improve the quality of education in three urban school districts.

Since that time, the Department of Education has piloted a number of other urban assistance efforts. These include an alternative summer and school year academic and work experience program for youth at risk, effective schools pilots, guaranteed training and jobs for urban high

school graduates, and teacher training institutes. New Jersey has also developed a long range "Plan for Excellence" which focuses on teacher preparation, recruitment, and recognition; a state high school proficiency test for graduation; state monitoring, certification and, if warranted, intervention; student behavior and expectations projects; increased compensatory education services (including a fiscal incentives component); and educational technology initiatives. These and other efforts such as the recently announced principals' certification plan, the school report card project, and the parental "choice" study enhance the quality of education, particularly in urban districts in New Jersey. The purpose of this paper is to offer the state's view point on one of its earliest initiatives - Operation School Renewal (OSR) - a multi-year assistance effort involving three urban school districts.

The presentation of the state's perspective is intended to complement the unique perspectives of one of the school districts that participated in OSR, as well as the perspective of an external evaluator familiar with the project. Prior to outlining "what we see" from the department's point of view, a brief overview of the Operation School Renewal Program is appropriate.

GENERAL PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Operation School Renewal is one of a number of experimental programs designed to assist urban districts. For the OSR project, the state determined five outcome goals based on input from the Commissioner of Education's Urban Education Advisory Committee. These goals included attendance improvement, reduction of disruptive pupil behavior, improvement in pupils' basic skills proficiencies, increasing youth employment through vocational education, and strengthening principals' effectiveness. For each of these goal areas specific measurable objectives were established by the department. In addition to focusing on the five OSR outcome goals, the department also provided assistance in the areas of technology and secondary special education. Attached is a complete description of the Urban Initiative as presented publicly in 1984.

Planning Assumptions/Expections

A number of planning assumptions guided the development of Operation School Renewal. These include:

1. The initiative would be based on the best that is known about school improvement;

2. School change is a long term process which much ultimately come from within the school itself;

3. The school community must have ownership of the school's character and improvement efforts;

4. The building principal is a key to school success;

5. Expectations for disadvantaged and minority children must be the same for their middle and upper-class counterparts;

6. Participating districts and schools would use local resources to continue programs and practices they found to be effective; and

7. The Department of Education would evaluate this experimental model to determine its efficacy and potential for wider implementation.

Selection Process/Criteria

Three New Jersey districts (Trenton, East Orange and Neptune Township) were selected from among 15 applicants to participate in the OSR program. Selection was based on a competitive process. District applications were reviewed by an external committee which subsequently conducted site visits to six finalists. The criteria for selection were district commitment, capacity, and need.

Organizational Features

State assistance to the three Operation School Renewal pilot districts has been provided by a full-time state director/coordinator and a "school renewal team." The original 1984 design called for the team to be comprised of personnel from various divisions within the Department of Education, consultants, business and industry representatives and higher education community members.

At the district level, Operation School Renewal has been implemented by a full time director, who reports directly to the chief school administrator of the district. The original design called for the local OSR director to lead a district coordinating council comprised of chairpersons for each of the major OSR goal areas (e.g., attendance, pupil performance, etc.). In turn, each of the chairpersons was to direct the planning activities of a small task force comprised of teachers, administrators and parents. Each chairperson and task force was to develop and track not only the three year OSR plan, but also the annual work scopes for their goal area. In addition to these district steering committees, each of the 51 schools in the three OSR districts was to establish, under the direction of its principal, a school planning team.

Throughout the OSR project, district coordinating councils, task force groups and the school planning teams have, to varying extents, developed strategies for reaching the five outcome goals of Operation School Renewal, as well as any other locally identified objectives. A description of the technical assistance provided by the Department of Education will be presented in Part Two of this paper.

Planning/Implementation

The planning and implementation of Operation School Renewal was designed to be a collaborative enterprise between the Department of Education and three local school districts. Planning was to have been goal based. At the outset of the project, approximately five months were devoted to the development of three year plans for each of the OSR goal areas.

District three year plans were submitted in February 1985. Most of the remainder of the 1984-85 school year was devoted to translating the district's first year plans into fundable state contracts. This refining process also involved school level plans and was very time consuming. It delayed the beginning of OSR implementation from winter 1984-85 until the start of the next school year - 1985-86. District and school implementation, therefore, began in earnest in the 1985-86 school year. In recognition of this fact, the department identified 1985-86 rather than 1984-85 as Program Year One of the three year OSR program. Therefore, OSR was extended through the 1987-88 school year.

Evaluation

From the outset, Operation School Renewal has been evaluated annually. The department engaged an external contractor (Rutgers University) to evaluate the project. Originally, the evaluation design was outcome focused. Evaluations were conducted by Rutgers 1984-85 and again in 1985-86. These formative evaluations provided base line data, as well as descriptions of program implementation. However, as the OSR project unfolded, additional emphasis was placed on process elements and program descriptions.

Prior to program implementation year two (1986-87) Rutgers informed the department that it could no longer direct the OSR evaluation. The department then requested assistance from Research For Better Schools, Inc. (RBS) in Philadelphia, Pa. to coordinate its data collection and evaluation activities while the state engaged its own staff evaluator. Under RBS' direction, year two data were gathered and site visits were conducted to document the extent of program implementation, as well as, preliminary indications of effectiveness. The program implementation year three (1987-88) summative evaluation report will be prepared by the department's new coordinator of evaluation in consultation with Research for Better Schools. In addition, the department has issued a bid for an external evaluator to prepare a validation study of the department's summative findings and to provide an independent analysis of the efficacy of this experimental program. The year three summative report will be issued in the spring of 1989.

Funding

Over the four years the project has been in existence (1984-85 to 1987-88), the New Jersey State Department of Education has provided approximately $8.9 million to the three Operation School Renewal districts. Districts received larger allocations at the start of the project than in its concluding year. (As its funding high point year, OSR represented between 2 and 4 percent of each district's annual budget.) In addition, the department has provided approximately $3.5 million over five fiscal years, through FY-89 (1988-89) for activities related to the Broad Based component of the Urban Initiative. Funding related to other projects noted earlier which are designed to assist urban schools is not included in the above figures.

PART II: IMPLEMENTING OPERATION SCHOOL RENEWAL

PLANNING PROCESS

Comprehensive planning is essential to any school improvement effort and has played a critical role in the implementation of Operation School Renewal (OSR). Local planning for OSR can be viewed as a three-tier process.

Initially, the districts formulated three-year planning guides to meet the five OSR objectives. These guides provided direction based on long-range objectives, planning and evaluation. The second phase of planning involved refining activities in the guides into specifically defined annual planning guides referred to as scopes of work. The scopes of work are in essence the document which detail what the district plans to do during a particular year and serves as the basis on which the New Jersey State Department of Education awards contracts to the local districts.

Finally, each OSR site or each school (51 schools among the three OSR districts) designs a yearly plan that details how a particular school will work to achieve the objectives and to accomplish the broader activities defined in the district scope of work. The plans detail tasks; resources, both human and fiscal; personnel responsible; and timelines. These plans are written by a School Planning Team comprised of a school administrator, teachers and, in some cases, parents.

The use of this comprehensive planning process--three year planning guides, annual scopes of work, and yearly school plans--is one strategy in an attempt to empower the district through a systems approach to planning.

STATE ASSISTANCE

While much of the ultimate success of the project will depend largely on the involvement and commitment of the participating districts, the State Department of Education had several important responsibilities in launching the initiative. These included organizing the statewide program, providing human and fiscal resources to support local improvement efforts, and implementing a monitoring system to ensure contract compliance.

Following are four (4) key components which detail the department's assistance to Trenton in implementing Operation School Renewal:

1. School Renewal Team

Originally envisioned as a core department team comprised of assistant commissioners and directors from the various divisions of the Department of Education, university personnel and business executives, the School Renewal Team (SRT) evolved instead as a group of department specialists who serve in various capacities from program planning assistance to contract compliance monitoring.

Specifically, the new school renewal team (SRT) provides assistance to local districts in several ways:

(a) During the development of the annual scopes of work, members of the SRT met with district personnel to provide feedback regarding the district's plans and to help the district to refocus on critical areas of need.

(b) Another way that the SRT is of some assistance is through weekly district meetings in which SRT members meet with district staff to review progress, to address emerging problems and to plan for future events.

(c) Similarly, school visits are conducted periodically to ensure that implementation of OSR activities is occurring at the building level. Visits consist of an initial conference involving the school principal, building-level OSR chairpersons and other personnel with direct responsibility for implementation of OSR activities.

During the weekly district program review meetings and the school monitoring visits, an item by item review of all activities is conducted.

A follow-up report on each program/school visit details general observations, progress towards plans, fiscal reviews, barriers to success, recommendations and follow-up activities. These reports are intended to provide the districts with an assessment of OSR activities within one of the component areas or within a given school. Reports address program effectiveness as well as areas needing attention.

2. Special External Assistance

In addition to the SRT, the Department of Education has attempted to assist the districts by providing external consultants to work with school personnel. State assistance involves both the identification of resource people by the department to train, evaluate, or consult with local staff and/or the availability of funds through OSR contracts in order for districts to select consultants based on their perceived needs.

3. Principals' Training Institutes

Recognizing that the principal's role is fundamental to school improvement, a series of principals training programs have been designed in collaboration with local district needs. The first type of training involves principal effectiveness seminars. These have been conducted both as single-day events and as overnight conferences. The seminars attract nationally-recognized figures in urban education and address issues which are relevant to OSR schools.

School Improvement Seminars have also been conducted as a follow-up to workshop topics introduced during the principals' effectiveness seminars. The school improvement sessions are day-long training events conducted by external consultants and/or staff from the department's Regional Curriculum Services Unit (RCSU). The RCSUs are the state's primary mode for the delivery of training and curriculum services to local districts.

A third type of training event occurs in the form of level-alike sessions. These sessions help to support school efforts and to encourage collegiality among principals. Level-alike sessions are designed to provide an arena where principals from similar schools (elementary, middle, etc.) can share school level efforts to implement, institutionalize and evaluate OSR activities. The level-alike sessions provide a mechanism for networking among urban principals and for sharing common concerns and practices.

4. Electronic Monthly Reporting System

An electronic reporting system enables the districts to communicate implementation of activities for each objective on a monthly basis. This monitoring of activities has provided a mechanism by which the department and the district can track progress systematically and thus provide a means by which districts through early identification can redirect strategies and resources to problem areas.

PART III: "WHAT WE SEE"

The results of Operation School Renewal in Trenton, as in the other participating districts, are mixed. The "what we see" question can be answered from several viewpoints.

Regard To Assumptions And Expectations:

- We see a difference between district and state expectations regarding the project's overall significance to the district (e.g. an "add on" program yielding additional funds vs "a top priority" to the district, board, superintendent, principals and teachers commit themselves for three years).

- We see a difference between district and state expectations with regard to Operation School Renewal influencing each LEA's policy and resource decisions.

- We see a problem sustaining commitment to Operation School Renewal primarily at the district level, but to some extent, at the state level as well. Important district personnel never developed ownership for OSR. They view it as an add-on to existing responsibilities. Local chief school administrators and their boards are only peripherally familiar with the project and, therefore, cannot or have not made it the basis for their district improvement plan. On the other hand, department personnel over time, have become increasingly engaged in other assignments so that OSR receives less sustained attention from division personnel than originally envisioned.

- We see the department's initial assumption of the project being fundamentally "collaborative" versus being "directive" as being counterproductive during the initial phases of the project.

- We see a difference between pilot district and state expectations with regard to the timing and applicability of state monitoring and certification procedures. Districts expected to be sheltered from state certification standards for the three year duration of OSR. The department expected OSR districts to meet state certification standards within the time frame set for all districts.

- We see the pilot districts and the department implementing the OSR experimental model differently then set forth in the original design paper.

- We see reasonable adaptations in the OSR model to accommodate different and/or changing environments in each pilot site, as well as the department's changing environment.

- We see problems with district communications mechanisms and other organizational development factors impeding, significantly, the planning and implementation of OSR.

- We see a sustained effort on the part of three urban school districts and the Department of Education to achieve the outcome goals originally set forth for Operation School Renewal.

- We see Operation School Renewal as one of several New Jersey experimental models which has produced useful information regarding stimulating urban school renewal through primarily district level assistance.

With Regard To Goal-Based Action Planning:

- We see the planning process occurring on both the district and school level as designed so that the "top down" determined outcome goals are addressed through bottom-up strategic and operational planning.

- We see ourselves and the districts underestimating the readiness and, in some instances, the skill level of key district OSR chairpersons and principals to conduct systematic planning.

- We see problems with district communications mechanisms and other organizational development factors impeding, significantly, the planning and implementation of OSR.

- We see OSR's "programs - to - outcome goals" strategy not addressing systemic problems in the district (e.g. politics, hidden agendas).

- We see the need for a full year devoted to the development and articulation of plans and contracts at the district and school level, as well as to training district personnel in systematic planning processes.

- The state extended OSR into a four year program so that each district could have three full years of implementation. This act was necessitated by the commitment of the initial year to planning and contract development. Given its magnitude, the OSR program may have needed even a longer period of time to implement thoroughly.

With Regard To Organization And Support Structure:

- We see, from an organizational perspective, the district's capacity to design sound educational plans while at the same time not always having the capability to move all segments of the organization to implement the desired changes. In essence, we see a wide variation in the quality of implementation efforts. In cases where a particular district chairperson or building principal "championed" for the improvement strategy, the quality was often very good. In other cases where the person responsible for the improvement strategies had merely supervisory responsibility and little personal ownership implementation was spotty and/or minimally compliant.

- The state extended OSR into a four year program so that each district could have three full years of implementation. Given its magnitude, the OSR program may have needed even a longer period of time to implement thoroughly. In Trenton, we see a district that was implementing less than 50% of all scheduled activities during the 1986-87 school year implementing over 90% of all scheduled activities during 1987-88.

- We see district administrative leadership ineffective in securing the cooperation of middle managers in fulfilling their responsibilities under OSR (e.g. chairpersons, steering committee, goal area task forces, school planning teams).

- We see OSR districts using external consultant help far less frequently than expected. In cases where consultants were requested and approved, districts did not always use them.

- We see district central office providing little or no leadership to school OSR planning teams.

- We see the teachers' unions and principal association using OSR as a bargaining weapon.

- We see little more than cosmetic efforts on the part of all district stakeholders (board, administration, teachers) to involve parents and the community in OSR.

- We see Operation School Renewal contributing to management overload.

- We see district organizational problems diverting department energy to accountability issues and the need to track activity completion.

- We see the need to expand state personnel working on the project. From a single state director in 1984-85, the project was expanded to include a full time state coordinator, a full time evaluation person and a fiscal person. Notwithstanding this increase in project staff, we see the need for technical assistance personnel to be assigned on a full time basis, rather than a part time basis to the project.

- We see the need for the state to be more proactive in brokering partnerships between business and industry and higher education with urban districts.

<u>With Regard to Financial Assistance</u>:

- We see a significant state financial commitment for improving education in urban school districts.

- We see districts regularly not expending OSR. In some instances, this amounted to 25-50 percent of the total funds allocated for a given year. (Note: District OSR directors have, for the most part, been conscientious about controlling expenditures for approved activities. However, the annual balances we perceived to be more a factor of the inability to organize for implementation than for inappropriate controls placed on the funds by a district OSR director.)

- We see funds being not as important as sustained assistance from external facilitator and content experts.

- We see districts attempting to absorb costs of effective programs into local budgets. Each year of the project, district administrators have attempted to assimilate a percentage of OSR costs into local budgets for those programs or practices perceived to be most effective. This effort is with mixed results given the pressures of the local budgeting process. Some effective practices will be sustained past the completion of Operation School Renewal in June 1988. However, others will not be sustained notwithstanding their perceived effectiveness by the districts.

- We see some OSR initiated programs that have not been particularly successful being institutionalized by districts at the expense of more successful projects. We perceive this to be a function of the political influence of personnel associated with these activities rather than an objective assessment of the activities effectiveness.

With Regard to Interim Results:

- We see a district which has not achieved the OSR standards as delineated in the original proposal, but yet has made considerable gains in certain areas. A comparison of Trenton's ninth grade High School Proficiency Test (HSPT) results of April 1987 reveal that the district rates of increase in reading and writing were comparable to those of the state as a whole and of other urban districts. The percent passing writing increased 15.3 points to 62.0%. In reading the increase was even higher at 18.8 with 69.6% passing.

- We see that while all schools have not succeeded in achieving the OSR objectives and may have shown minimal interest in exerting efforts to implement new strategies or to work with department of education staff, or for that fact to cooperate with district personnel, others have embraced Operation School Renewal.

- For example, we see a junior hign school program whose pupil achievement scores have risen in reading from 41.2 in 1986 to 77.9 in 1987 and in writing from 39.2 to 60.5. Gains of 36.7% in reading and 21.3% in writing.

- We see schools which were 16 and 17 in rank among eighteen elementary schools, according to the district's ranking based on pupil performance scores, move to a ranking of 5 and 8, respectively.

- If we look at the data on student attendance and pupil performance across the district, we see that in 1984-85 only 36% of the schools were achieving the 92% standard established under OSR. In 1986-87, 60% of the schools are achieving that standard. Additionally, there is reason to believe based on current statistics that this figure will rise for the 1987-88 school year.

- Similarly, we see a district where in 1985-86 only five of eighteen elementary schools, 28%, were achieving the reading levels at grade 3 consistent with state requirements for certification. In contrast, thirteen of eighteen elementary schools, 72%, achieved the standard during 1986-87. Math results revealed similar patterns.

- Finally, we see a district that despite fiscal constraints has managed to budget 23 out of 29 programs for institutionalization.

PART IV: THE FUTURE

Change efforts inevitably induce goal overburden, since new activities compete for existing demands. In many instances, school reforms such as OSR require human resources--energy and commitment--more than financial resources.

Operation School Renewal represents one attempt to introduce effective and long-term changes in urban schools. The story of Operation School Renewal in Trenton is not complete. OSR is currently in its third year of implementation. Problems and difficulties with implementation are giving way to discussions concerning quality of programming.

Most importantly, OSR has given us a practical foundation on which to draw implications about urban school reforms that may be useful in future state efforts to improve the quality of schooling in our city schools.

Currently Department of Education staff are analyzing evaluation information related to Operation School Renewal, the Broad Based Component, and other special assistance efforts (e.g. HSPT Summer School/School Year program, Effective Schools projects) to fashion future state assistance efforts for urban schools. Originally, Operation School Renewal was intended to be replicated in additional districts after the first three year cycle. Current plans call instead for the department to take what it has learned from OSR and its other various experimental models and use this information to fashion a new more widely available program directed at urban schools.

At present, New Jersey is designing this school-focused assistance program. This program will incorporate the best features of the State's various urban pilot projects. Through this new assistance effort the Department of Education expects to work closely with between 50 and 100 individual schools starting in the 1989-90 school year.

The school assistance project will be characterized by a commitment to helping schools implement the effective schools research, as well as, to strengthening pupils' basic skills performance and the instructional strategies which will make this improvement possible. Schools will be given modest planning grants. They will receive

sustained, onsite support from a specific state facilitator. This primary change agent will work as a member of a team of full-time facilitators. These facilitators will possess knowledge and expertise not only in the effective schools research and school change literature, but also in a specific content area such as mathematics, reading or writing. The specifics of this program are currently being developed and will be submitted to the Governor and legislature for funding in the FY-90 (1989-1990) budget.

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